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The project runway: Cheryl Chong on getting your social initiative off the ground

Cheryl Chong

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The Project Runway

Cheryl Chong on Getting Your Social Initiative Off the Ground



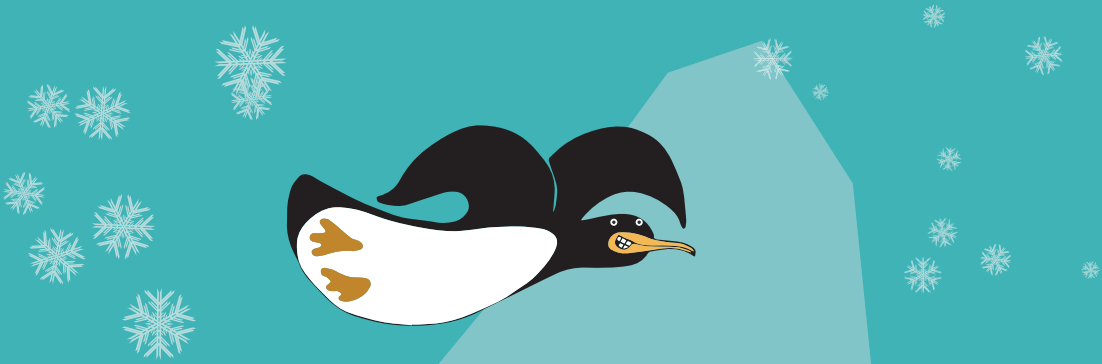
Cheryl Chong is co-founder of The Social Co., the team behind the 50 For 50 project that brought together more than 80 young people under the age of 35, and 70 corporations to raise awareness of and funds for lesser-known causes such as mental health, suicide prevention and charities that serve those with physical and mental disabilities. Cheryl currently chairs the Young Women's Leadership Connection (YWLC) and lends a hand in programme development at Jia Foundation, a family foundation established by the Lim and Lin families. In her day job, she heads the private investor division of equity and debt crowdfunding platform, FundedHere. Here are Cheryl's tips on how to give your social initiative a roaring headstart.

Best time to start?

Anytime, really. It's about matching what you're good at and the cause(s) that you're passionate about. The youngest changemakers I ever worked with were 15 year-olds who raised funds and awareness for cancer research. It could be as simple as rallying your schoolmates to enact some kind of social change such as by clearing their own trays after their meals at foodcourts or fastfood restaurants, or bringing their own reusable bags when grocery shopping.

Any course of study that is most applicable for aspiring changemakers?

We can learn continuously but there's no way we can know everything. What's important is to find the right team of people who have complementary skillsets. In our team, we've got people who studied Accountancy, Business or Marketing, and volunteers who are trained in Law, Communications and various other fields. Other teammates are good at building presentation decks or have a flair for financial budgeting and Excel spreadsheets.



Character traits required to start and sustain a social initiative?

Passion, positivity, a can-do attitude, adaptability, ability to think out-of-the-box, empathy and authenticity.

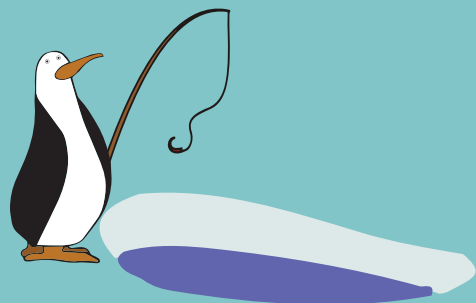
How do you identify issues worth addressing?

It can be as simple as observing the different people you meet or being aware of your surroundings. It can also happen when you take yourself out of your comfort zone, whether in learning about social issues or interacting with different people. When I volunteered at my first camp organised for at-risk youth, I realised that there were many facets of society that we may not be exposed to if we didn't get out there more.



What comes next?

Form a good team that shares and is committed to the same vision. Put together a council of advisors. Be constantly aware of why you are doing what you've set out to do. Research and thoroughly understand the needs you are addressing. The rest will fall into place thereafter.





**What if I'm doing this on the side?
How do I manage running a social initiative
and a day job?**

Arrange to have meetings with your "change" team at any time of the day, whether it's over lunch, after work, over dinner or supper, and sometimes on weekends. At other times, communicate via Skype, shared drives and project management tools, so you can edit documents remotely as a team. Be prepared to receive emails at ungodly hours too. I suppose when you are passionate and remember why you are doing what you're doing, balancing your social initiative with a full-time day job gets somewhat easier.

**Haters gonna hate.
How do you deal with naysayers?**

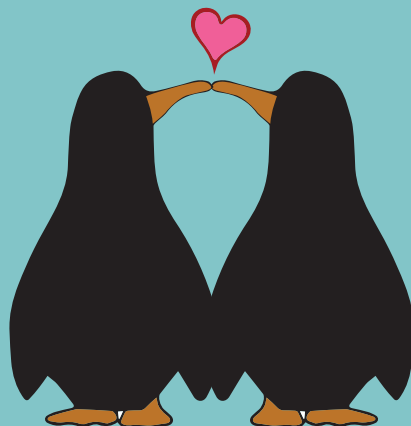
We respect everyone's points of view, but the only way to prove naysayers wrong is by the outcomes we produce. I always keep my focus on solving the issues at hand.

**Plan Bs: When do you pull the plug and
activate your backup plan?**

Plans are always changing, so most of the time we find ourselves adapting and modifying our plans along the way. The sooner you recognise that what you've planned might not always work out and that there are always factors beyond your control that affect your plans, the better. Having said that, always have your Plan B, C, and even D at hand.

What are good milestones to set?

Your team's goals, objectives and vision. Raising your first 100K, 200K or 300K for your beneficiaries. Make it a point to celebrate even the small wins like getting your first corporate sponsor or donor on board, or having successfully organised your first event.



What's your single biggest piece of advice for aspiring changemakers? If they could only take one thing away, what would you want it to be?

Be authentic.



What's in store for
aspiring changemakers?

With greater awareness of social impact,
there will only be more we can all do to become
changemakers in our own ways. Work is no
longer just about getting that dream high-paying
job, but about contributing and creating positive
impact in whichever organisation you join or any
project you initiate.